

How Obama Can Win in 2012

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The Obama White House probably watched the Republican primary season with some dismay as a series of candidates including Michele Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul, each more bizarre and unelectable than the others, briefly donned the mantle of front-runner before giving way to Mitt Romney. Romney, the likely Republican nominee, feels like a generic representative of his party from a generation ago. He was born to privilege, made a lot of money, is committed to making his rich friends richer, uncomfortable with the more radical social conservatives who constitute the Republican Party base, awkward when confronted with ordinary working Americans, but extremely comfortable with the financial and foreign policy power elite.

With Romney as the Republican nominee, Obama will have a serious opponent. Romney, like Obama, is not a perfect candidate, but he is good enough to muster a strong campaign. There are, however, several things which could break Obama's way, and over which the campaign has some control, that would sharply improve the president's reelection chances.

First, while much attention has been paid to the declining enthusiasm felt towards Obama particularly by young voters who do not see 2012 as a crusade or cause comparable to Obama's historic 2008 campaign as well as by many on the activist left who feel disappointed or even betrayed by Obama's centrist governance and unwillingness to genuinely take on the right wing and Republican Party, Obama remains very popular among African American voters. High African American voter turnout was an important element of Obama's success in 2008. Because Obama is now running for reelection, 2012 cannot compare to the excitement Obama generated in 2008 during his bid to become the first African American president.

The Obama campaign can, and must, still devote resources and time to bringing out as many African American voters as possible. Republican attacks on Obama have not resonated much with African American voters who generally do not even consider voting for the GOP. Similarly, these attacks made against an African American president can be used to demonstrate the urgency of voting in 2012. A strong African American turnout can help ensure that America's first African American president is not drummed out of office by relentless extremists on the right. The Obama campaign spent millions of dollars mobilizing African American voters in 2008 and must be prepared to do the same in 2012. The campaign has the financial resources and can activate many of the same networks and individuals who helped bring out African American voters in 2008. This strategy will be critical in swing midwestern states as well as a handful of border states that could be in play in November.

Obama also should not run only against Romney, but against his party as well. Romney presents as a reasonable and moderate person, but in this respect he is different than the rest of his party.

If voters see the choice as between Romney and Obama, some swing voters will give Romney more thought than if the choice is posed as between the Tea Party and Obama. For this reason, Romney should not be allowed to distance himself from the extremist wing of his party or some of the radical things he will continue to do as he secures the Republican nomination. Obama has already started to do this as he has turned his criticism to the unpopular Republican controlled House of Representatives, but the campaign should also seek to join Romney with Bachmann, Perry and other right wingers who are very unpopular with most voters.

Obama also needs to change the way he speaks of the presidency. In 2008, Obama, probably unrealistically, presented the presidency as an office from which the country could be changed and hope could be restored. Since taking office, Obama appears to have viewed the presidency as a highly constrained office, limited by political opposition in Congress and by the difficult economic and international political environment which existed in 2009 when Obama took office. There is a fair amount of truth in this assessment, but it is not a politically wise way to discuss the office. Voters are unlikely to be enthusiastic about a candidate who does not think he can do much as president. Most voters simply don't agree with this analysis, while those who agree still are likely to see it as depressing and hardly a good reason to elect somebody president. Accordingly, Obama needs to inject his campaign with some of the optimism which characterized his successful 2008 bid for the White House. Rather than explaining to voters why being president is difficult, Obama's reelection bid would be better served if the president explained why the presidency is important and what he wants to do in his second term.

Obama cannot recreate the 2008 campaign because he is now the incumbent, but he should not run from it entirely. Bringing out a strong African American vote and running as the optimistic forward looking candidate worked in 2008 and can play a key role in 2012 as well. If he does these things, and portrays his opponent as linked to the radical right that has taken over much of the Republican Party, Obama may be able to get reelected despite the economy.